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The  
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THE ÉCOLE DES CHARTES

IN the classroom at the École des Chartes the lecturer looks over the heads of his pupils to a fresco on the wall behind them, representing the monastery of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The subject was aptly chosen. For the École des Chartes, although housed now in the new Sorbonne, has nothing in common with the traditions of the old University of Paris, depicted in the colors of romance upon the walls of the central arcade. The École des Chartes is an intruder, still preserving its autonomy, and linked more closely both in ideals and in actual history to the great Maurist monastery than to the ancient centre of rhetoric and scholasticism which gives it a home. It was created with the definite purpose of continuing the work begun by d'Achery and Mabillon and has been true to its purpose.

The loss to history resulting from the dissolution of the monasteries in the French Revolution was felt almost immediately. The creation of the Institut failed to supply what had been destroyed, and Napoleon in his concern for the decadence of literature extended his interest to the study of history as well. Though not destined to become the founder of the École des Chartes, he outlined a project by which the Collège de France was to undertake the practical instruction in historical research and the encouragement of that side of literature which would lead to the production of works of real utility. On the nineteenth of March, 1807, when stopping at the castle of Finckenstein between the battles of Eylau and Friedland, Napoleon received from the Duc de Cadore the outline of an institution which was to play the part of a Port-Royal, rather than of a Saint-Germain-des-Prés, in the revival of literature. This plan, drawn up by Cadore's secretary, Baron de Gérando, exhibited some of that quality of its author's mind which enabled him, in the words of Sainte-

Beuve, "to turn out books like macaroni". Napoleon's terse comments transformed these propositions into practical terms;<sup>1</sup> but the strenuous life of the First Empire did not furnish good soil for such an enterprise, and the Collège de France was left to go its own more or less peaceful way, cut off from the main educational forces which have since then transformed the system of higher education in France.

The proposition of Baron de Gérando was not destined to be realized in connection with either the Collège de France or the Sorbonne. With a conservatism worthy of England, these two historic institutions were left unmolested by the innovators, while alongside of them new and independent schools were founded to meet the demands of the scientific spirit. The École des Chartes and later the École Pratique des Hautes Études were founded for a definite purpose and conducted with a complete disregard of the traditionalism of their environment. Naturally in the course of time the steady pressure of their influence transformed the methods of the ancient institutions, at least of the Sorbonne; and the triple confusion which is the result offers a threefold advantage if one but learns its reason and its meaning—advantages of which the American student who comes to Paris has seldom any clear idea.

The present École des Chartes was founded in 1829, after an abortive effort in 1821 to give effect to the ideas of Baron de Gérando. Refounded in 1846 and remodelled in 1869, the school was moved from its quarters in the Archives in 1897 to the new Sorbonne, where in the centre of all the educational activity in Paris it maintains its own autonomy and pursues undisturbed its own aims. Its former students, formed into alumni societies, maintain a spirit of loyalty which recalls that of the early days when the contributors to the *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* established the right of the school to exist in spite of the indifference of the monarchy of July. Although the students may supplement the slight curriculum of the school with courses in surrounding institutions, they remain through life stamped with the indelible impress of the École des Chartes.

Outwardly there is little in the curriculum to explain the important part which this school has played in the history of French historiography and in the development of historical research in general. It is in form merely a technical school for the training of archivists and librarians. Its courses are planned with that distinct purpose.

<sup>1</sup> See "Notes et Documents pour servir à l'Histoire de l'École Royale des Chartes", by M. A. Vallet de Viriville, *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, second series, volume IV. (1847-1848), pp. 153-176.

Admission as a regular student is accorded to about twenty successful candidates selected each year by a competitive examination. For three years these students must be in regular attendance upon all the lectures, signing the roll at every *conférence*. Upon graduation the government opens for them the position of archivist either in Paris or in the provinces.

There are only three courses a year, although one runs over from the second into the third. Compared with the imposing prospectus of an American university, the programme of the *École des Chartes* makes but a poor showing. Yet when one looks over the roll of distinguished scholars who have been trained in its scientific methods of research, one cannot but recognize in its scanty programme a force which has few parallels in the history of modern culture. Though the high renown of the school is due rather to the subsequent achievements of its alumni than to any clear appreciation by outsiders of what they were taught while students, still its graduates themselves have attributed the success of their later work to the simple but strict training of its courses, in which the traditions of the Benedictines of Saint-Maur have been preserved amid the routine of a practical curriculum. Those traditions and their results are well known. But the actual process by which they are achieved and maintained has escaped the chronicler. In order to indicate it, however, we shall have to renounce the easy path of generalities and enter the classroom itself.

No American student has ever taken the full three years at the *École des Chartes*, and it is not likely that any ever will. To do so, one would divorce himself entirely from the needs and the resources of American universities and libraries. The degree *archiviste paléographe* which the state accords to the graduate of the school is of value only to those who live in Europe, where there are archives to catalogue and medieval documents to publish. The courses which directly interest the historical student may be taken easily in a year—or could be if the time-table of *conférences* were rearranged. Even some of these courses need not be followed closely; for they are rather for the training of those whose investigations pave the way for the historian by the preparation of texts than for the historical student who will, as in America, be limited in his researches by whatever texts are at hand. In short, it would be a mistake in almost every instance for the American student either to devote himself to the entire course of studies at the *École des Chartes* or, in view of other courses at the Sorbonne or the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, to devote himself entirely to them even for a year.

He will therefore likely enter as an auditor, taking any course or courses which appeal to him. If his purpose is sufficiently serious to warrant such a favor, he will also be permitted, by the courtesy of M. Paul Meyer, the director, the free use of the library, with its perfect equipment of sources, manuals, and facsimiles. This is a rare privilege, for no lordly *appariteur* stands between him and the books; and the little workroom is the place where he will become acquainted with the *élèves*, and enter in part at least into that remarkable confraternity, where it is the unwritten law for the students of the third year to help those of the second, and those of the second in turn to place their erudition at the service of those of the first. The solidarity of the *élèves* of the École des Chartes becomes a tradition from the first lecture of M. Élie Berger in the first year, and remains unbroken through life.

There are three courses in the first year: one in Romance languages by M. Paul Meyer, one in paleography by M. Élie Berger, and one in bibliography by M. Charles Mortet. While M. Meyer himself would advise the student of history not to take his course in philology, the *élèves* of the school all regard it as one of their rare privileges. It is of course philology at its best; and if one has never taken up Old French or has any need of Provençal or Gascon sources, it is well worth while to watch the care with which the phonetic laws are traced through multitudes of examples. The bibliographical indications and incidental references to other subjects give the course a special value and breadth. One would certainly take it if his work in history lay within the range of its results, not otherwise.

Although not recommending itself by such vast stores of erudition, the course in paleography by M. Élie Berger, the successor of M. Léon Gautier, will be much more useful, because it is the practical study of the essentials of text-reading. M. Berger enlivens the *conférences* with comments in which his keen sense of humor sometimes leads to short digressions. But he has ample ground for it in the diverting revelations of the students' ignorance of church history—as when for example one of them declared that Saint Peter and Saint Jerome were the two favorite apostles. Each recitation consists in the reading (by members of the class) of a facsimile of some medieval manuscript from the collection in the library. This practical drill is accompanied by questions upon the subject treated in the text; but as these facsimiles are chosen for the handwriting only, the comments are of a most general nature. There are also frequent references to Latin grammar, sometimes to the discomfiture of members of the class. In addition to the recitations, part of the time is

devoted to correlative subjects, especially to the history of ancient and medieval handwriting. The great value of the course is in the practice, the continual and unremitting study of the facsimiles which it involves. The student who wishes to benefit fully by it should by all means have free access to the library and the facsimiles for his regular preparation.

Historical bibliography, as taken up by M. Charles Mortet, is the indispensable introduction to all of the mechanism of research. After the preliminary practical survey, it develops the subject historically, and touches in places upon the same ground as the parallel subject-courses. In some ways it is perhaps too special for the foreign student; but he may be attracted by the interest of a subject which, when conceived historically, develops into hardly less than the explanation of how the written records of the past have been preserved to us. Yet absorbing as it is, one cannot but wonder if it would not have been possible for the *École des Chartes* to have developed more directly the practical duties of librarians to-day. The *érudit*, trained himself in the methods of research, is not sufficiently reminded of the duty of a librarian to perfect the instruments of work for those who are not specialists in his subject. In this respect the utility of the *École des Chartes* has fallen short of the ideal of Napoleon, as all workers in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* will confirm.

Of the courses in the second year, by all means the most important is that on diplomatics by M. Maurice Prou. Indeed this is, from the historian's point of view, the most important course of the school. M. Prou is a worthy successor of the lamented Arthur Giry, whose memory is still reverently cherished by his former pupils. It is in this course that one comes upon that minute and keen analysis which is the basis of the scientific method. The manner of conducting the work is approximately the same as in the course in paleography. The facsimiles are read this time, however, for their content, not for the handwriting; and all the auxiliary sciences necessary to the interpretation of medieval documents receive sufficient treatment to put the student in a position to rely absolutely upon himself when he takes up independent research, special emphasis being laid upon chronology. The students hand in exercises at the recitations, and each receives a generous proportion of red-ink corrections and suggestions. M. Prou gives himself up to the work before him, drudgery as some of it is, with a zeal which is rewarded by the grateful tributes of every student of the *École des Chartes*. Giry's manual and Prou's portfolio of facsimiles should open the opportunity for some attempt in American universities to repeat the work which

most of all lies at the basis of what is unique in the training of the *École des Chartes*.

The course in French institutions by M. Jules Roy is of a distinctly different character. It involves no research beyond the study of well-known manuals, and will disappoint any one who comes to the *École des Chartes* expecting to do research work in history proper. It is fortunate that there are other institutions at hand to supplement the instruction of the school in this respect. M. Roy's course covers the field in a painstaking way and it insures a knowledge of the elements of the institutions of the Middle Ages, but it involves no research among the original sources. M. Roy's research course is given at the *École des Hautes Études*.

The "Service des Archives", to which M. Eugène Lelong devotes a weekly *conférence*, is intended for the practical training of archivists in French archives, yet the long historical introduction contains not a little valuable history. The actual description of present conditions of work in the archives does not begin until the close of January. The manual by Langlois and Stein, tested by actual investigations at the archives, will largely compensate for the loss of this course if for any reason it proves difficult to attend it; for, although of the greatest value to the French student, it is perhaps too special for the American, unless he intends to work extensively in France. The same remark is true of the course on the "Sources of French History", which cannot in the nature of things contain much of independent value since the publication of Molinier's *Répertoire*. M. H. F. Delaborde pursues this subject through both the second and the third year, with enlargements upon Molinier. But nowhere else does one obtain such a keen realization of the loss to historical research by the untimely death of Molinier as in the classroom where his work took shape. The course remains much what Molinier made it, a survey of the narrative sources of French history; and it gains still from a sense of his prodigious labor, for Molinier followed true French traditions and did the work himself instead of exploiting his students. It is interesting in this connection to refer to Molinier's own comment on the importance of this course. He tried in it to save the *École des Chartes* from neglecting the chronicler and annalist for the exclusive study of charters. The tendency of the student trained in diplomacy under such masters as Giry and Prou is instinctively away from the literary sources. Molinier's work was in a sense more difficult than that of Giry, for his materials were both vaster and of more uncertain value. His

manual is a lasting witness to the way he faced his responsibilities at the École des Chartes.<sup>1</sup>

In the third year, besides the second course of M. Delaborde, there are two others: one on the history of civil and canon law in the Middle Ages, by M. Paul Viollet; and the other by M. Robert de Lasteyrie on the archaeology of the Middle Ages. M. Viollet evidently recognizes that the day of the canonist is doomed in France, for the history of the canon law itself is finished before Christmas, and then the course shifts into a history of French law through the Middle Ages. The historian of French law and institutions has fortunately already published much of what he gives in the classroom; but, in spite of a delivery difficult for a foreigner to follow, the students regard his course with the respect due to so distinguished a master, and speak with reverent affection of his genial personality.

In medieval archaeology one naturally places next to the name of Jules Quicherat that of Robert Comte de Lasteyrie—master and pupil. M. de Lasteyrie's task as the successor of Quicherat was naturally a heavy one, but he in turn has imparted to his pupils the inspiration which has produced a manual like that of Enlart, and an interest in medieval archaeology which has extended much beyond the classroom of the École des Chartes. The history of art has received from this course a legitimization which should find some echo in the serious programme of historical studies in America. One cannot there, it is true, take his class in the spring on excursions to Coucy and Blois; but a well-equipped history department can in other respects follow the method of instruction of the École des Chartes. M. Lasteyrie's health prevents him from conducting his *conférences* regularly, and they are often taken by his former pupils Enlart or Lefèvre-Pontalis.

Such are the courses at the École des Chartes. One must remember that their great value consists in the steady and close application which they demand of the student. Recitations which are real tests, and which are faced with the sense of their importance, develop a spirit of work which is the distinctive mark of the "Chartist".

After the examinations on the courses, a thesis has to be written. This must be ready for the formal defense in the January following

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Moliner, *Les Sources de l'Histoire de France*, V. clxxvi: "Toutefois, il faut reconnaître que dans cette sévère école, trop fidèle à certaines traditions bénédictines, on a longtemps montré plus de prédilection pour l'étude des documents diplomatiques du moyen âge que pour celle des sources narratives; beaucoup des excellents érudits qu'elle a formés ont donné de remarquables éditions de chroniques et autres textes historiques, mais aux temps déjà lointains où l'auteur du présent ouvrage en suivait les cours, on n'y parlait guère des historiens latins ou français du moyen âge; on s'occupait exclusivement de chartes et de diplômes."

the completion of the three years' work. The student therefore spends all the summer and fall of his third year upon the completion of a thesis which he has begun during the regular terms. It generally involves practical investigations in the national or provincial archives, and one can see the serious character of the work by a glance at the synopsis published yearly under the title "Position des Thèses." In more than one case the thesis has been made the basis for a contribution of the first importance.

The defense of the thesis is a public function; and the examiners consist of a "Conseil de perfectionnement", including besides the professors the administrators of the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Director of the Archives Nationales, the Director of the École des Chartes, and five members of the Académie des Inscriptions elected by its members. The president is the venerable Léopold Delisle. His rugged Carlylean features are lighted up by a genial sympathy as he comments upon the work of the young students who one after another are called to the table facing the jury. The presence of the aged and distinguished historian lends dignity to a scene marked by the utter absence of formality. The unsuccessful candidate is simply told by his professor that he must do his thesis over again; the successful learn their order of merit in a list posted up after the tests are over. It is an anxious period of waiting, for the first on the list is sent by the government to the École Française de Rome.

One naturally asks what there is in this limited curriculum to yield such important results. The very limitation of the studies to a single field is no doubt an important factor; but since the students generally take courses in the Sorbonne, the École des Hautes Études, or the École de Droit as well, this cannot be the main reason. It lies rather in the thorough practice which is exacted of every student in the subjects which are covered. There are no superficial courses along the gilded margin of attractive subjects. The work is intensive and severe. The discipline is as valuable as the knowledge acquired. This seems to be the secret of the power of the École des Chartes. "Not eager for quick returns of profit", it has reaped more largely of the years that followed.<sup>1</sup>

J. T. SHOTWELL.

<sup>1</sup> A distinguished alumnus thus sums up the reasons for the success of the École des Chartes: "L'École doit sa valeur: (1°) au petit nombre d'élèves, (2°) à l'obligation stricte de suivre les cours, (3°) à l'entraînement auquel les examens de semestre et annuels soumettent les élèves, (4°) à l'obligation de toujours recourir aux originaux, d'apporter des documents inédits, bien lus, bien ponctués, bien compris, prêts pour l'impression, (5°) à la sévérité de l'examen des thèses, et à la terreur qu'inspirent certains professeurs ou membres du conseil; et ces messieurs sont inaccessibles aux recommandations extra-scientifiques. *Viri boni, discendi periti.*"